

California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
California Interagency Wildlife Task Group

YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD

Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus

Family: ICTERIDAE
B522

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Breeds commonly, but locally, east of Cascade Range and Sierra Nevada, in Imperial and Colorado River valleys, in the Central Valley, and at selected locations in the coast ranges west of the Central Valley. Nests in fresh emergent wetland with dense vegetation and deep water, often along borders of lakes or ponds. Forages in emergent wetland and moist, open areas, especially cropland and muddy shores of lacustrine habitat. Restricted distribution in Central Valley in winter, occurring mainly in the western portion. Fairly common in winter in Imperial Valley. Occurs as a migrant and local breeder in deserts and along Orange county coast. Has bred, at least irregularly, as high as 2000 m (6600 ft) in San Bernardino Mts. (Grinnell and Miller 1944, McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Adult feeds primarily on seeds and cultivated grains; eats insects in breeding season. In Sacramento Valley, insect consumption reached a peak of 20% in summer (Crane and DeHaven 1978). Young fed mostly insects, some spiders and snails (Willson 1966). Feeds in emergent vegetation, along moist shorelines, and in nearby grasslands and croplands, preferably near water or on moist ground. Often hawks flying insects (Bent 1958).

Cover: Dense emergent vegetation used for nesting, roosting, for cover during postbreeding molt, and other cover needs (Bent 1958).

Reproduction: Nesting colony located in dense emergent wetland of cattails, tules, other plants, often along border of lake or pond. Breeds only where large insects such as Odonata are abundant; nesting timed to coincide with maximum emergence of aquatic insects (Willson and Orians 1963). Nest placed in emergent vegetation (rarely willows), usually 0.2 to 0.9 m (0.5 to 3 ft) above water surface; typically near edge of emergent vegetation farthest from shore, above water 0.6 to 1.3 m (2-4 ft) deep (Bent 1958). Large wetlands preferred.

Water: Nest and roost always located over water, and most foraging takes place over water, near water, or on moist ground. Drinking water probably required, at least when seeds and grains are major foods.

Pattern: Nests, roosts, and does much foraging in fresh emergent wetland. Also feeds along shorelines and in nearby open fields, preferably on moist ground. Foraging ground may be as far as 1.6 km (1 mi) from nesting colony (Willson 1966), and probably considerably farther from winter roost.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Much of California breeding population migrates south to winter. Uncommon as a winter resident in Central Valley, occurring mostly in southern portion; fairly common in Imperial Valley. Elsewhere, including coastal areas, rare and irregular in winter. Migrants occur outside breeding range in April, early May, and September, particularly in southern California deserts and coastal areas.

Home Range: Breeders in eastern Washington foraged up to 1.6 km (1 mi) from nesting territory (Willson 1966).

Territory: In scattered cattails in Imperial Co., Willson (1966) reported 24 territories averaging 116 m² (1250 ft²), and 75 territories varying from 37-46 m² (400-500 ft²). In eastern Washington, she found territories much larger, varying from an average of 455 m² (4900 ft²) for 13 territories in bulrush to 2800 m² (30,000 ft²) for 7 territories in scattered cattails. In Utah, 11 territories averaged 0.012 ha (0.03 ac) (Fautin 1940).

Reproduction: Breeding season lasts from mid-April to late July. Polygynous; each male may have 2-5 mates nesting on his territory (Willson 1966). Usually nests in a large colony with nests fairly closely spaced. Average clutch 4 eggs (range 2-5). Mostly raises a single brood per yr (Willson and Orians 1963). Incubation lasts 10-13 days. Altricial young tended by female or by both parents; leave nest at about 9-12 days, but do not fly until about 20 days. Probably breeds first at 1 yr (Harrison 1978).

Niche: Adults aggressively attack hawks, crows, and other large birds near territory. Probably the most important predators on eggs and young are mink, great horned owl, northern harrier, red fox, and muskrat (Bent 1958). Storms and changes in water level can be very destructive. Brood parasitism by brown-headed cowbird occurs occasionally (Friedmann 1963). Males may form flocks postbreeding, separate from females and young. May join very large mixed flocks in winter with other blackbirds, cowbirds, grackles (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

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